



## **Dominicans and the Key of Knowledge<sup>1</sup>**

A Talk to Dominican Friars Studying in Rome - PUST, Angelicum, 19 February 2023

### **Paul Murray OP**

I have been asked, during this time of retreat, to address a topic that's already very familiar to you. You are, in fact, almost the most informed audience imaginable. So, what can I hope to say, this morning, that's new, that's fresh, that's in any way helpful? All I can do – and I'm honoured and humbled to attempt it – is to share with you a few thoughts, a few loaves and fishes of insight. You yourselves, of course, will be able to bring to all that I say your own thoughts, your own vision, and that encourages me to make a start.

#### **1**

### **Taking Hold of the Key**

What is the main motive, the principal reason for being sent to Rome as Dominican friars to study at one or other of the Pontifical Universities? The answer is simple: it is, of course, to gain new knowledge. But how does this knowledge differ from the knowledge which students in secular universities are actively seeking, whether here in Rome or elsewhere in the world? There is a particular phrase which Christ uses in St Luke's Gospel, Chapter 11, a tiny phrase, but one which can, I think, assist us in answering the question. The phrase occurs during a heated conversation which Christ had been having with certain scholars of his own generation, a group of lawyers. At one point, with a surprisingly strong, indeed almost fierce passion, Christ refers to something which he calls 'the key of knowledge.' What he has in mind is not, obviously, a form of academic knowledge that's merely static, but rather knowledge that transforms, knowledge that has the power to open a door into a new world of truth and freedom, knowledge that saves.

At one point, when Christ is speaking with the scribes, he is scarcely able to contain his anger. 'Woe to you,' he exclaims, 'scholars of the law, for you have taken away the key of knowledge!' (Lk 11:52). The reason Christ is in such a rage is because the group he is addressing, the scholars, although they had been offered the tremendous opportunity of

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<sup>1</sup> Lecture delivered on February 19, 2023 at the Pontifical University of St. Thomas Aquinas in Rome (PUST-Angelicum), intended primarily for Dominican friars currently studying in Rome.

receiving ‘the key of knowledge,’ didn’t make the necessary effort to take hold of it. They were, it would seem, lazy and complacent. What’s more, they managed to block the path of others of their generation, non-scholars presumably, who clearly wanted to enter into the house of knowledge but, in the end, were denied the chance. ‘You yourselves,’ Christ remarks to the scholars, ‘have not entered, and you have kept others from going in’ (Lk 11:52).

Something of the urgency of Christ’s statement I find echoed centuries later by Blessed Jordan of Saxony in an encyclical letter he sent out to the entire Order. Jordan was alarmed to discover that the younger men in formation were not committing themselves enough to their academic tasks. He was worried, as a result, that they might fail to grasp the Gospel vision and focus instead on their own private pieties and devotions. Should they do that, Jordan warns, the results will be grave. Apart from ‘neglecting their own benefit,’ they will, he notes, ‘deprive many people of a chance of salvation, when they could have helped them on their way to eternal life if only they had studied properly.’<sup>2</sup>

A knowledge informed by the Gospel – redemptive knowledge – that, as you know, was of immediate and major concern to St Dominic at the beginning of the Order. And that explains why he sent his young friars to the different universities of Europe, acting with an urgency and speed that was quite remarkable. Obviously, the circumstances of the hour had impressed upon Dominic that a great deal was at stake. He realized that the people of his own generation, like people in every generation, perish without a vision, without the help, in other words, of what Christ names, in that small telling phrase, as the ‘key of knowledge’.

With regard to yourselves, when the period of study in Rome has come to an end, and you will have successfully, let’s presume, passed all your exams, you will be awarded a well-deserved degree or diploma. And that, of course, will be no small joy, no small achievement. But there is something else which you will be taking back home with you which is far more important than a diploma. A diploma, after all, or a degree, is something for yourself. But if, by happy providence of grace and hard work, your years in Rome enable you in the end to seize hold of ‘the key of knowledge,’ you will be able to return back to your different countries and provinces with a gift that is *for others*, a living knowledge of God and of the Gospel which will help open doors into a new freedom of spirit, a new depth of understanding, a new fullness of life.

## 2

### **Doves and Ravens: Two Kinds of Student**

Aquinas, in one of his Biblical commentaries, contrasts two very different kinds of student, one he calls a raven and the other a dove. The ‘raven’ is the student whose only real interest is his

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<sup>2</sup> Jordan of Saxony, ‘Encyclical Letter, May 1233,’ in *Early Dominicans*, pp.123-24.

own intellectual fulfilment and satisfaction. In contrast, the other student is unselfish, a ‘dove’ of charity and compassion, a man of prayer, someone who not only contemplates but who desires, and with great urgency, to share with others the fruits of his study and contemplation. The dove image St Thomas found, of course, in the Book of Genesis, the dove which returns back speedily to the Ark of Noah in order to bring the good news. In contrast, the raven, the self-absorbed academic, has no particular concern for the needs of others, no strong, no active interest of any kind in what his neighbours may be enduring. Thomas writes:

The raven did not turn back to the ark. But the dove returned bearing a green olive branch. Those fly like ravens who do not turn back to the ark by the affection of holiness, for they do not think of anything but themselves, namely, how they might track down some truth ... But those fly like doves who both contemplate and turn back towards their neighbours, teaching what they have contemplated, those who, with the green olive branch in their mouth, bear as porters the oil of mercy, devoting themselves to their neighbours.<sup>3</sup>

Fr Vincent Mc Nabb, a Dominican from Ireland but a member of the English Dominican Province all his life, remarked once, while giving a talk to his Dominican brethren: ‘The world is waiting for those who love it ... If you don't love men and women don't preach to them – preach to yourself!’<sup>4</sup> None of us, as friars preachers, are sent to Rome to focus primarily on our own careers, or to impress the people back home, or to explore, for our own pleasure, some highly specialized area of academic research. Should I discover in time, however, that this is, in fact, the *main* motive driving me in my studies, then I will have become, or I will soon risk becoming, one of those selfish ravens of whom St Thomas speaks. What's more if, during the period of my studies, I don't possess at least something of the urgency felt by Dominic for the preaching task, if I am not contemplative day to day of the grave and pressing needs of my contemporaries, and of the significance of my daily commitment to study in relation to those needs, then, almost certainly, I will have become as indifferent to the needs of others as the scribes and scholars at the time of Jesus.

### 3

#### **A Spiritual Famine**

Being made aware day to day of the truly desperate plight of so many of our contemporaries in the world, the studies we are undertaking here at the Angelicum, and elsewhere in Rome, might well appear, on occasion, to be somewhat detached from reality, a form almost of self-indulgence. Absorbed in our different academic tasks, it might seem to an outsider that we have no special interest in or concern for those among our contemporaries who are most in need of

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<sup>3</sup> Psalm LIV:5, Busa, Vol 6, p.128.

<sup>4</sup> Spoken by McNabb during a retreat in 1927. See: *An Old Apostle Speaks: Father Vincent McNabb O.P.*, ed., G. Vann O.P. (Oxford 1946) p.3.

help. Should we, therefore, consider abandoning all our intellectual pursuits, and devote ourselves instead to answering as best we can the most pressing, most immediate needs of the poorest of the poor in our society? That phrase ‘poorest of the poor’ brings at once to mind the life and work of St Teresa of Calcutta. Many years ago, I remember, when I was studying here in Rome, pursuing a licence degree in spirituality, Mother Teresa was invited to come and talk for half an hour to one of our classes. She spoke first about her work and about the hunger and degradation of the poor people whom she and her sisters were serving in Calcutta and elsewhere. But then she said to the class, and I’ll never forget it:

Don’t be looking back over your shoulder at the poverty of Calcutta, and at the work which we are trying to do there. Instead, realize that your God-given task for these years is to give your whole-hearted attention to the task of study. That is your vocation here and now, that is your call. Yes, the poor of the world are indeed starving for food, but there is another kind of starvation in the world, and it’s no less profound, no less terrible. People are desperate to know the meaning of their lives, they are starving for the saving knowledge of God, they are starving for the truth that gives meaning, for the truth that saves and sets free. Who will answer that need, who will answer that hunger, if people like yourselves don’t give their whole attention, during these privileged years, to an ever deeper understanding of the Gospel vision? Don’t be distracted from your task by looking back over your shoulder at the poverty of Calcutta. Attend here and now to that other grave hunger of spirit which exists everywhere in the world. Attend to the necessary, much-needed task which God has given you.

Yes, indeed, famine can take many different forms. Blessed Humbert of Romans, in his *Treatise on Preaching*, draws our attention to a depth of hunger in society that should never be overlooked. ‘Man does not live by bread alone,’ he declares, repeating Christ’s words, ‘but by every word which comes from the mouth of God.’ Without hesitation, therefore, Humbert asserts: ‘If preaching fails, there is spiritual famine.’<sup>5</sup>

If today, as friars preachers, we are keen to address that famine, anxious to bring to those among our contemporaries, who are spiritually starving, the alms of truth, the bread of meaning, we need first and last to feed our own minds on that bread, on that truth. We need, in other words, as soon as we are made aware of our own poverty, to study in depth the Word of God, not as an isolated text merely, but as a living truth, a wisdom which speaks like nothing else on earth to the needs of the present hour. For nowhere in the world can there be found a teaching which gives more complete and accurate attention to the most urgent needs of our contemporaries.

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<sup>5</sup> Humbert of Romans, ‘Treatise on the Formation of Preachers,’ in: Simon Tugwell (ed.) *Early Dominicans: Selected Writing* (New York 1982) p.189.

### The Grace of Attention

‘Attention,’ that word recurs a number of times in a remarkable document on study sent by Simone Weil in 1942 to her friend and spiritual confidant, the French Dominican Father Perrin. It is entitled ‘Reflections on the Right Use of School Studies with a View to the Love of God.’ At one point, speaking of the usefulness of studies, Weil makes bold to say: ‘The development of the faculty of attention forms the real object and almost the sole interest of studies.’<sup>6</sup> And she adds: ‘Whoever goes through years of study without developing this attention within himself has lost a great treasure.’<sup>7</sup>

In similar vein, St Albert the Great, in one of his homilies, speaks of the necessity of giving a very particular kind of attention to the needs of others. Commenting on St Paul’s invocation in Romans 12:15, ‘Rejoice with those who rejoice, weep with those who weep,’ Albert writes: ‘[St Paul] means that ... you should make your heart like your neighbour’s heart, so that when he is happy, you are happy, and you grieve with him when he is grieving.’<sup>8</sup>

What we might call the gift or grace of attention is described for us in the Acts of the General Chapter of Providence (2001) with one brief telling phrase – ‘intellectual compassion.’ What the phrase suggests is that the essential point of Dominican study is to be able to share with others not simply truth in its unmoved, detached objectivity, but truth in its most dynamic form – truth, in other words, in the form of a deeply intelligent and profoundly creative attention. *Misericordia Veritatis* is the phrase used in the text to describe it – ‘the Mercy of Truth.’ ‘Study,’ we are told, ‘helps us to perceive human crises, needs, longings, and sufferings as our own.’ And further: ‘The intellectual mission of the Order calls us to share not just the “gaudium et spes” [the joy and hope], but also the “luctus et angor” [the grief and anguish] of our time.’<sup>9</sup>

That idea is not, of course, a new idea. It expresses, in fact, the manifestly wise understanding of the subject possessed many years ago here at the Angelicum by Blessed Hyacinth Cormier – the vision which Cormier had of Dominican study when he helped re-found our university. Cormier wrote, and his words leap off the page when we read them: ‘The study of the holy books [of Scripture] demand of us that we acquire the entrails of mercy and extend them.’<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> Simone Weil, *Waiting on God*, translated by E. Craufurd (Glasgow 1983) p.66.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, p.75.

<sup>8</sup> St Albert the Great, in: *Recherches de Théologie Ancienne e Médiévale* (1969) p.121; cited in: S. Tugwell (ed.), *Albert and Thomas*, (New Jersey 1988) p.36.

<sup>9</sup> Prologue, ‘The Intellectual Life,’ *Acts of the Elective Chapter of the Friars of the Order of Preachers, Providence 2001*, no.109 (Rome 2001) p.46.

<sup>10</sup> Gilles Berceville and Guy Bedouelle (eds.), *Le Père Cormier: Être à Dieu*, (Paris. 1994) p.128.

## Scholarship, Freedom, and Sanctity

All too often in contemporary spirituality we are encouraged to believe that it is the heart which brings us close to those in affliction, not the mind, not the intelligence. As a result, time dedicated to study can be perceived as a positive hindrance to helping the needy and a hindrance also to the pursuit of holiness. Sometimes we are even encouraged to make a journey, an exodus, out from the captivity of the so-called dry and grey intellect, to the fresh and living springs of the heart.

This dualism, however, between head and heart is something quite foreign to the Dominican spirit and understanding. Actual goodness, it is true, can certainly be considered as the holiness of the heart, since from there charity springs. But thinking, serious thinking about the Gospel, and about the world we are living in, can itself be a form of holiness, and a necessary form. Accordingly, Dominicans in every age tend to insist that there can be no serious awakening to God without an awakening in the mind. For, as disciples of the Word, we discover at the end if not at the beginning of our studies that, whereas goodness may indeed be the holiness of the heart, truth is the holiness of the mind.

No small part of the intellectual discipline demanded of Dominicans who are called to higher studies is what we call scholarship.<sup>11</sup> But what role exactly does scholarship play in the life of the Order and in the life of the Church? How critical is its contribution? Simon Tugwell, in a short but insightful paper entitled *Scholarship, Sanctity and Spirituality*, points out that ‘scholarship helps to keep open or to re-open the options that are actually there in the church.’<sup>12</sup> He recalls the fact that Teresa of Avila always preferred learned directors to merely pious ones. ‘Spiritual but unlearned directors were cramped by their own experience; they knew only one way to be Christian.’ In contrast, ‘Learned directors ... were more free precisely because of their learning, more *free* to recognise as legitimate ways of being Christian which were not part of the prevailing ethos.’<sup>13</sup> The reality is, of course, that people will often be swayed by the fashions of their own age. And this holds true for spirituality as for everything else. What scholarship, at its ordinary best, can help us to see is that the authentic gospel tradition is not limited by the dominant fashions of thought and feeling of one particular generation.

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### The Adventure of Study

The most notable example, in Dominican history, of a scholar and theologian whose work helped liberate his own and later generations from the tyranny of a single vision, is St Thomas Aquinas. His first biographer, William Tocco, stresses the newness of Thomas’ approach to almost everything. ‘In his lectures,’ Tocco writes, ‘he raised *new* questions, and discovered a

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<sup>11</sup> In this context it seems appropriate to translate the word "*scholarship*" with these expressions; see the following note (N.d.t.).

<sup>12</sup> Simon Tugwell, O.P., *Scholarship, Sanctity and Spirituality*, Discurso pronunciado en la Universidad Gonzaga de Estados Unidos y publicado en forma de folleto (Spokane 1983) p.3.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*

*new* and clear way of solving them, and he used *new* arguments in arriving at these solutions.’<sup>14</sup> A major part of our inheritance as Dominicans is the Thomist tradition, a gift, an inheritance, that’s of almost incalculable worth. But, needless to say, neither Thomism nor its most celebrated text, the *Summa theologiae*, should ever be presented as a fixed book of answers. That would suggest to students of philosophy and theology, engaged in the search for truth, that there was no longer any adventure left, as if truth itself, centuries ago, had already been fully known, systematized, and expressed in eternally fixed formulae.

This was not what Thomas Aquinas believed – not for a moment – and nor was it the vision of Dominicans after him such as Catherine of Siena, Johannes Tauler, Bartolomé de Las Casas, Garrigou-Lagrange, and Yves Congar. In this context I find it rather sad but also somewhat hilarious to recall a comment made on the *Summa*, several decades ago, by a certain Dominican Archbishop. Talking to a group of novices, he declared: ‘Make sure that all of you read the *Summa* of Aquinas. It contains fifty-six thousand answers to all those who criticize the Catholic Church!’

St Thomas, if he heard that declaration, would surely turn in his grave!

What, then, should be the aim of Dominican friars studying in Rome? First and last it should, of course, be to grow in knowledge of the living dogmatic and spiritual tradition of the Church, something that requires not only hard work and a healthy spirit of passionate enquiry but also a fundamental spirit of humility. If, however, real growth is to take place, what must also be in play, in this process of learning, are the questions which have been provoked by the student’s own experience. In the Eighth of the *Nine Ways of Prayer* of St Dominic, we have an impressive example of a man bringing his whole self – mind, heart, and spirit – into a place of reflection and prayer, a man obviously at ease with God and, therefore, unafraid to express whatever thoughts and feelings might happen to arise. ‘It was as if,’ we read, ‘he were arguing with a friend, at one moment he would appear to be feeling impatient, nodding his head energetically, then he would seem to be listening quietly, then you would see him disputing and struggling ... then again speaking quietly and beating his breast.’<sup>15</sup>

Though Dominic, we are told, has sat down to read a book, he is clearly not engaged in formal study. It’s more like meditation or *lectio divina*. Nevertheless, the space, the reverence, which Dominic lends here to his own thoughts and feelings in the search for God should, I think, encourage those of us involved in the task of study not to dismiss as somehow distracting or unimportant the questions which likewise rise up from the weight and pressure of our own experience. It is in allowing for this kind of personal engagement with the authority and genius

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<sup>14</sup> William of Tocco, *Vita S. Thomae Aquinatis*, in: *Fontes Vitae S. Thomas Aquinatis*, Fasciculus II, ed. D. Prümmer (Toulouse 1924) 81.

<sup>15</sup> *The Nine Ways of Prayer* of St Dominic, Prayer 8, in *Early Dominicans*, p.101.

of the great tradition which, more than anything else, helps transform the dogged task of study into an adventure.

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### Knowledge into Wisdom

Nowadays we find ourselves surrounded by many new forms of learning and social media, all of them vying for our attention: web pages, audio-files, YouTube, Twitter, Facebook, and so on. We are witnessing what has been called, and for good reason, an ‘information explosion’. It is a virtual ‘tsunami’ of *knowing*. And yet all the information in the world will never add up to that illumined knowledge, both simple and profound, which we call wisdom. Many years ago, the poet T.S. Eliot posed a question which remains, I believe, as sharp and relevant as ever:

Where is the wisdom we have lost in knowledge?

Where is the knowledge we have lost in information?<sup>16</sup>

Wisdom, you could say, is knowledge that goes straight into the bloodstream and changes a man’s life. It affects his whole being. And that, needless to say, is the kind of knowledge which, over the centuries, transformed the lives and writings of the Dominican saints we most admire. If, at this moment, we were able to speak directly with Aquinas and ask him how he was able to become such a great student, such a truly profound man of wisdom, I’ve no doubt that he would give the same answer he gave centuries ago to his Dominican brothers, namely that ‘prayer and the help of God had been of greater help to him in the search for truth than his natural intelligence and habit of study.’<sup>17</sup>

Wisdom is the knowledge that’s most critical when it comes to the apostolate of preaching and teaching. So how, then, should we prepare ourselves to receive that gift, that grace? Is there a way, a practice, which can help bring about the transformation of knowledge into wisdom? The answer is, of course, one that you know well. It is the humble day-to-day practice of private prayer and, with that, the gift, the challenge also of keeping faith day to day with the ordinary Dominican practice of communal prayer.

The preacher’s task is succinctly, brilliantly, summed up in the phrase “*contemplata aliis tradere*,” passing on to others things contemplated.<sup>18</sup> Part of that task, a huge part, involves the acquiring, through devoted study, knowledge about the Gospel which we are then happy and willing to communicate to others. But that does not describe the entirety of the task – far from

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<sup>16</sup> T.S. Eliot, ‘Chorus from the Rock,’ in: Id., *Complete Poems and Plays* (London 1952) p.96.

<sup>17</sup> Bernard Guidonis, *The Life of St Thomas Aquinas*, 15, ed., Kenelm Foster (London 1959) p.37.

<sup>18</sup> *ST*, III. q.40, a.1, ad 2.



it. For the phrase “*contemplata aliis tradere*,” if not understood properly, can easily give the impression, the *mistaken* impression, that preachers, as they reflect on the mysteries of faith, remain in supreme and complete control of the process, sitting at their desk, as it were, and taking down educated notes on the Gospel in order to pass the information on to others.

In the preparation for preaching, however, there comes a point when something more is demanded of us as preachers. For honest prayer sooner or later requires that, during the time of prayer, we move out of our comfort zone, and are willing, after the manner of St Dominic at prayer, to take a risk. It requires that I stand before God just as I am, naked and desiring, vulnerable and needy. This will involve, yes, a definite seeking of God on my part, and a contemplation of God. But it will involve also, and far more importantly, God contemplating me, God’s light and love and power impacting on my heart and soul, on my mind and senses. Far more important, therefore, than my seeking God is the fact that God is seeking me, God is searching my heart, God is testing my heart, God is making demands on the preacher.

Of the many challenges facing us today as preachers, perhaps the most demanding of all is the call to go into the gap of prayer, and somehow to find courage to stand still in the radiance of the divine scrutiny, exposed in all our human frailty and brokenness. It is there in that place which can seem and can feel at times so completely dark and cold and empty, it is there that the light and the fire have their source – the light of the knowledge of God, and the fire of the grace of preaching.

Earlier I made reference to the scholars at the time of Jesus who had failed to benefit from the great opportunity given to them to seize hold of the key of knowledge. In contrast, what has impressed me over the years, regarding the student friars who have come to Rome for further studies, is that, almost without exception, they have been more than willing to seize with both hands the opportunity given to them by the Order. If, however, there is one criticism to be made, and it’s a criticism I make of myself, it’s that sometimes we focus so intensely on our academic tasks, we risk overlooking other key challenges and other needs, not least among them the need for constant, dedicated prayer. After all our years of study in Rome, it would be a real pity if we returned home to our provinces, decidedly more informed than before, yes, and more knowledgeable, yes, and more manifestly clever, but not perhaps an iota more wise!

No one was more dedicated to study than Brother Thomas d’Aquino. But he remained all his life a man of profound and humble devotion. He clearly understood that a life exclusively devoted to the task of study was a life at risk. According to one of his contemporaries, Bernard Guidonis, ‘in order to offset the aridity which is so often the result of abstract and subtle speculative thinking.’<sup>19</sup> Brother Thomas would devote a certain amount of time to reading works which speak more to the heart than to the head, texts, for example, from the desert

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<sup>19</sup> Ibid., p.38.

fathers. This humble practice, Guidonis goes on to say, ‘did both his heart good by increasing devotion and his intellect by deepening its considerations.’<sup>20</sup>

When a scholar adopts an exclusively scientific or academic approach to both life and work, almost inevitably the result is an unhappy dullness and dryness of spirit, an atrophy of the faculties. This happened, two centuries ago, to the great English scientist Charles Darwin. In his autobiography he makes the following startling admission: ‘My mind,’ he writes, ‘seems to have become a kind of machine for grinding general laws out of large collections of facts.’<sup>21</sup> What a grim fate for a scholar! We can only hope and pray that no Thomist, young or old, will ever find himself adopting such a cold, machine-like approach to the adventure of study and research.

With regard to intellectual pursuits in general, it is of course required of us that, in our studies, we are as rigorously scientific as possible, and as knowledgeable as possible also regarding the saving doctrines of the orthodox Catholic tradition. But something else is required, especially if we are called to be preachers. It is something to which St John Paul II has drawn particular attention. In his semi-autobiographical work *Donum et Misterium*, he writes: ‘The minister of the Word must possess and pass on that knowledge of God which is not a mere deposit of doctrinal truths but a personal and living experience of the mystery.’<sup>22</sup>

All of us are aware, I think, of the gap which exists between mere academic knowledge and the knowledge that is living faith experience. What has always impressed me about the teachers and preachers in the Order of Dominic whom I most admire is that, although all of them, like ourselves, experienced in the beginning the sharp, humbling awareness of the gap ‘between knowing and knowing with all one’s soul,’<sup>23</sup> they learned with God’s help, over a lifetime of surrender to the demands of study, fraternal life, and the life of prayer, to abolish that distance.

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### Wisdom and the Cross

It is prayer, as has been noted already, which more than anything else helps transform knowledge into wisdom. But there is something else as well which can achieve, I believe, that same kind of transformation. It is the reality of the cross in our lives. John Henry Newman, St John, says of the preacher that if he has never really suffered in his life, he will almost inevitably

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<sup>20</sup> Ibid.

<sup>21</sup> *Charles Darwin: His Life told in an Autobiographical Chapter and in a Selected Series of his Published Letters*, ed. Francis Darwin (New York 1893) p.54.

<sup>22</sup> Pope John Paul II, *Gift and Mystery: On the Fiftieth Anniversary of My Priestly Ordination* (New York 1996) p.111.

<sup>23</sup> A phrase from the French philosopher Gustav Thibon. It occurs in his Introduction to *Gravity and Grace* by Simone Weil, trans. Arthur Wills (New York 1952) p.5.

preach superficial sermons, using the Word of God ‘for his own purposes.’<sup>24</sup> In effect, he will be talking about himself. Newman then goes on to remark, and his words are memorable: ‘But let his heart at length be ploughed by some keen grief or deep anxiety, and Scripture is a new book to him.’<sup>25</sup>

The difficulties and challenges which we experience as student friars here in Rome, though they may seem slight compared with the sufferings of others, are nonetheless very real. For some, the trial is the fact of living away from home in a foreign country, and being bereft, therefore, of the normality of an active Dominican apostolate. For others, the trial may be the studies themselves, the challenge of coping with new and difficult subjects and also, let’s admit it, with new and sometimes difficult professors! I find it encouraging to note here that Thomas Aquinas himself faced challenges of his own as a young student friar. A manuscript has survived in Thomas’s hand, a fragment of a copy by Thomas of a commentary composed by Albert the Great on Pseudo-Denis.<sup>26</sup> In thirty-eight lines of manuscript, there are a surprising number of errors made by Thomas. At one point the young scholar even leaves out an entire line! What we are witnessing here is the great Aquinas as a fallible young student, a young man devoted to his task but, like the rest of us, not always able to get it right!

A wise Dominican remarked to me years ago that, if a brother has a problem of some kind, no matter what it is, and if he comes to Rome for studies, Rome will bring that problem to the surface. Well, it’s an exaggeration, of course, but there might just be something in it all the same. Finding ourselves away from the ordinary, happy pressure of the apostolate at home, it’s no surprise if we begin to feel as if our lives are somehow suspended. As a result, we can be hit by a new and unexpected sense of vulnerability and, along with that, by a few piercing shocks of self-knowledge. This can be humbling, of course, but the new knowledge gained in the process can, I suggest, be as critically important as all the new academic knowledge which we have been acquiring.

The struggles we face day-to-day in our lives and in our studies, and even actual failures on occasion to achieve our academic goals, might in the end be of as much value as our achievements. Why? Because they help to awaken within us a grace of attention to others. Our difficulties, Aquinas points out in the *Summa*, help us to grieve over others’ misfortunes as if they were our own. Very different, he says, are those people who are always successful, ‘those who regard themselves as so fortunate and powerful as to imagine that no evil can befall them: such have no pity.’ And Thomas concludes: ‘Thus it is always some want in us that moves us to mercy (*semper defectus est ratio miserendi*).’<sup>27</sup>

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<sup>24</sup> John Henry Newman, *An Essay in Aid of a Grammar of Assent* (London: Burns, Oates & Co, 1874) p.62.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid.

<sup>26</sup> Leonard Boyle discusses this particular manuscript in his essay ‘St Thomas Aquinas and the Third Millennium.’ See *Omnia disce: Medieval Studies in Memory of Leonard Boyle*, OP, ed. Anne J. Duggan and Joan Greatrex (New York 2005) pp.294-95.

<sup>27</sup> *ST*, II II, q.30, a.2.

It is natural, of course, to pray that this ‘defect’ be removed. St Paul, we know, suffered what he called ‘a thorn in his flesh.’ Three times he begged the Lord to be freed from ‘the pricking and resistance of his flesh’ but without success. God the Father, addressing directly Paul’s dilemma in *The Dialogue* of Catherine of Siena, makes the following remarkable declaration:

Could I and can I not make it otherwise for Paul and the others in whom I leave this or that sort of pricking? Yes. Then why does my providence do this? To give them opportunity for merit, to keep them in the self-knowledge whence they draw true humility, to make them compassionate instead of cruel toward their neighbours so that they will sympathize with them in their labours. For those who suffer themselves are far more compassionate to the suffering than are those who have not suffered.<sup>28</sup>

## 9

### Wisdom and Joy

If Aquinas were here with us this morning, and giving the talk, what would he say to us? Well, he would, I’ve no doubt, encourage us to devote ourselves wholeheartedly to the task of study, and to make of it as much as possible a joy and an adventure. But Thomas would also point out to us, as he does in the *Summa*, that there are times when we need to stop and ‘slacken the tension of mental study.’<sup>29</sup> Otherwise, study might well become for us no more than a drudgery and an oppression. He recommends, therefore, by way of a break, whatever it is that gives us the most obvious pleasure and delight. In our case, what comes to mind immediately are things like sport, or listening to music, or going for a hike in the hills around Rome. I would add to that list finding time also to read outside of one’s own limited field of academic interest, reading great literature, for example, great novels and great poetry and, in that way, keeping fresh the springs of the heart and the imagination.

When the Irish Dominican Leonard Boyle was a student at Oxford many years ago, he came upon a text in Hugh of St Victor which encouraged him to keep his mind and heart open to worlds outside his own field of specialization. That text, in the original Latin, can now be seen inscribed on Leonard’s tomb in the lower Church of San Clemente here in Rome. In Latin the text begins ‘*Omnia disce.*’ In English translation it reads ‘Learn everything. Afterwards you will discover that nothing is wasted. A narrow science is no fun.’<sup>30</sup> The mention of ‘fun’ is telling. It’s perhaps an unexpected but key ingredient in Dominican spirituality from the very beginning. It’s there in the *Vitae fratrum*, and it’s there in the *Summa*. So, Aquinas was

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<sup>28</sup> St Catherine of Siena, *The Dialogue*, 145, trans. Suzanne Noffke (New York 1980) p.305.

<sup>29</sup> *ST*, II II, q.168, a.2.

<sup>30</sup> Hugh of St Victor, *Didascalicon* 6.3, ed Buttimer, 113-17, trans. Franklin T. Harkins, in: *Interpretation of Scripture: Theory*, ed. Franklin T. Harkins and Frans van Liere, p.166.

completely and happily in line with the Dominican spirit and tradition when, in the *Summa*, he took to task those people who are so serious about themselves they never say anything laughable or funny (*nec ipsi dicunt aliquid ridiculum*) but instead are always trying to obstruct the fun or the amusement of others.<sup>31</sup> Such people are not only unpleasant company, according to Thomas, they are also morally suspect. He writes: ‘Those who are lacking in fun, and who never say anything ridiculous or humorous, but instead give grief to those who make jokes, not accepting even the modest fun of others, are morally unsound [in Latin *vitiosi*].’<sup>32</sup>

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This morning we are here together on retreat. If we were in a classroom, and not on retreat, there are many things which Thomas Aquinas would no doubt want to say to us. But, for the moment, I think it’s worth asking ourselves what Thomas would like to say here and now if invited to speak? As it happens, there is one particular sentence which comes to mind. It’s from Thomas’s commentary on St Paul’s letter to the Philippians. Thomas chooses on occasion to paraphrase Paul but, on this occasion, he goes even further and actually extends the text, betraying the strength and depth of his passion as scholar and preacher to communicate to others something of the tremendous grace and freedom which he experiences in knowing Christ Jesus.

Allow me, then, to bring this talk to a close, by reading the text itself, the statement, which, I am persuaded, Thomas would like to say to each one of us here this morning on retreat: ‘I long for you to be in the very heart [literally ‘in the entrails’] of Christ Jesus, that is, in order that you may love him intimately, and that you may be loved by him; for human life consists in this.’<sup>33</sup>

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<sup>31</sup> ST, II II, q.168, a.4.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid.

<sup>33</sup> *Super epistolam ad Philippenses lectura*, ch 1, lect. 2, 15, in *Super epistolas*, Vol 2, p.93.